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ABSTRACT

This document reports on a telephone survey of higher education planning activities in the western United States that sought information on the development of intrastate electronic consortia for higher education services. A taxonomy of "virtual universities" was developed to make it possible to compare differences and similarities between plans. The taxonomy included: (1) virtual university/college (degree granting, no physical campus); (2) virtual university consortium (accredited non-degree granting academic institutions linked on-line, with articulation and centralized or coordinated student services); (3) academic services consortium (accredited non-degree granting academic institutions linked on-line, not articulated, but with centralized or coordinated student services); and (4) university information consortium (no degree, no coordinated student services, accredited academic institutions linked electronically). States have taken different approaches to their planning and are at different points in the process of developing consortia. Barriers to developing consortia identified by states that had successfully gone through the planning process included: funding; governance issues; getting all players to participate; resident versus non-resident tuition; removal of geographic service areas; articulation; multiple academic calendars; differing prerequisites and grading systems; lack of consistency in course software; and faculty issues. Advice on forming intrastate electronic consortia from those who have successfully gone through the planning process is presented. (RAB)

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Planning for Statewide Electronic Consortia among the Western States

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In the spring of 1999, the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications conducted a telephone survey[i] of the statewide planning activities in the 15 WICHE states[ii]. Our goal was to get a sense of which states were considering the development of intrastate electronic consortia for higher education services. We were aware that several of these states had already developed such consortia and wanted to be able to share what they had learned with others that were in an earlier stage of the planning process.

Since there are so many different ways for colleges and universities to work together in an electronic environment, we shared a taxonomy of "virtual universities[iii]" with the survey participants. We used that taxonomy to increase the chances for understanding the differences and similarities between the different plans. The relevant portions of the taxonomy follow:

> **Virtual University/College** - degree granting, no physical campus (e.g. National Technological University, Western Governors University, Jones International University)
> **Virtual University Consortium** - no degree granted but accredited academic institutions linked on-line and supplying centralized or coordinated services to students with mutual articulation among consortium members (e.g., Washington's Virtual Campus Consortium)
> **Academic Services Consortium** - no degree granted but accredited academic institutions linked on-line and supplying centralized or coordinated services to students with no articulation among consortium members (e.g., Kentucky's Commonwealth Virtual University)
> **University Information Consortium** - no degree; no coordinated services to students; accredited academic institutions linked electronically (e.g., ex-California Virtual University, Southern Regional Electronic Campus)

The chart below summarizes the current activities and planning for statewide higher education projects we found. They are organized based on the type of electronic institution or consortium that was reported to us at the time of the survey.

Different states have taken different approaches to their planning and are at different points in the process. Hawaii has had a network in place for several years that links all its higher education campuses throughout the state. It has been offering courses among the campuses over its network. Currently Hawaii is trying to sort out the issues involved in course articulation among these campuses. Montana, on the other hand, does not have a higher education network as robust as Hawaii's. There are several reasons for this which fall into

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Plans for "virtual universities" in Western states in spring 1999		
Virtual University/College	**Virtual University Consortium**	**Academic Services Consortium**
Colorado Electronic Community College	*Planned* Arizona Learning System Washington Online Utah Electronic Community College Cal State TeachNet	Arizona's NAUnet University of Hawaii System *Planned* Idaho Virtual University *Planned* North Dakota's Virtual University Alaska Learning Cooperative Oregon's Common Catalog of College Distance Education Oregon Community Colleges Distance Education Consortium *Planned* South Dakota Virtual University Utah's EdNet
University Information Consortium		
California Virtual University Idaho's Business Core Collaboration Nevada's Joint Distance Learning Catalog New Mexico's Electronic Distance Education Network		

organizational and resource categories. Hawaii has a single governing board while Montana has a less centralized system with a coordinating board. Montana is focused on the articulation issue, however, as it develops course materials for electronic distribution throughout the state. Montana's Higher Education Coordinating Board has developed a grant program to fund the development of electronic courses. One of the requirements for receiving funds is that the course must be developed by a team of individuals from multiple campuses.

Both Oregon and North Dakota have networks in place that link the higher education institutions but they have been used primarily for ad hoc courses. Oregon is focusing its efforts and some outside grant money on developing a full range of services for students that can be delivered electronically. North Dakota is likewise planning for greater convenience for students who wish to study electronically by having a Web site that will list all the available learning opportunities from North Dakota colleges and universities.

In South Dakota each of the colleges and universities have operated independently with regard to electronic delivery of courses or programs. The single Board of Regents there is developing a unified plan coordinating the electronic higher education services available to students throughout the state from its institutions.

Since several of these western states had already completed the development (some more successfully than others) of statewide efforts, we asked the people who had been involved in the planning to share with others what they saw as barriers to successful development of their project. We also asked them to share some advice they would offer to others just getting started in this activity.

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The barriers include:

- Funding.
  This includes both the initial funding needs for the planning, technological infrastructure, training and support of the faculty, as well as the continuing funding to operate the system.

- Governance issues.
  When a network is in place, who makes the decisions regarding its use? How are standards and priorities determined?

- Getting all the players to participate.
  As planning progresses, it is unusual for all the campuses in a state to be equally involved. Since not all campus leaders may want to have their institutions involved in serving students electronically, it may be wise to consider this early in the planning process.

- Resident versus non-resident tuition.
  When an institution begins to offer programs electronically, the signals do not stop at any political borders. Depending on the organization of the student support structures, the costs of serving students within a state can be about the same for serving students outside the state. Since many of the electronically-delivered programs are run by institutions in a cost-recovery mode and the out-of-state students do not use any services within the state, some argue the distinction is not relevant. In addition, the way to make electronically delivered programs cost-effective is to have a large number of students enrolled. Program administrators claim that forcing them to charge an inflated and arbitrary rate to non-residents of their state (out-of-state tuition), put them at a disadvantage in the market when compared to private institutions or institutions that are not required to charge an out-of-state rate.

- Removal of geographic service areas.
  The same issues mentioned above can make service areas a barrier. Electronic signals do not stop at arbitrary borders. The costs of developing and running a class for students to take electronically is high and to recoup that investment, the institution must attract a large number of students. It makes little sense for traditionally defined service areas to exist in this environment. It may make sense to have public institutions accept areas of responsibility in which they guarantee service to students. Excluding areas where students can be served, however, is potentially inappropriate and costly to the state.

- Articulation among partners.
  When students use a statewide system to take courses electronically, they expect that any course they take through the system is going to count toward their academic goal. When different types of institutions in the state participate, the faculty members at the research universities are not always ready to accept

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as equivalent the credits earned in a course from a community college or a rival state four-year university. Unless some type of articulation is sorted out among the participating institutions, the students may be the losers.

- Multiple academic calendars.
  Since most institutions develop their academic calendars independently, there is frequently little agreement among the colleges or universities in a state. This can be a major problem for students and administrative staff in statewide "virtual universities." A student who signs up for two classes from two institutions through a single Web transaction may well experience the inconvenience of having them start and end at different times, as well as the confusion of having different mid-term breaks and exam times. However, and more importantly, the student may not understand that each course has a different number of days into the course when he or she can drop the course without academic or severe economic penalties.

- Differing pre-requisites and grading systems.
  Once again the independent way that academic practices were developed creates yet another barrier for electronic collaboration among institutions. It is very difficult to justify the lack of consistency among these practices when students go to a single site to see what courses are available and what they must have in the way of background to register for the course. Inconsistent grading systems pose problems for students who are trying to use courses from multiple campuses to meet their academic goals.

- Lack of consistency in software of courses.
  As different courses are developed by different institutions, they may require different software on the receiving end of the course. That means students are put into a position of having to acquire and learn to use multiple software packages.

- Faculty.
  Since not all faculty members can or should be involved in the planning process for statewide electronically-offered services, many are unaware of the reasons behind the planning decisions that are made. In addition, the radical changes in the way they run their classes, work with their students, and the schedule shifts that affect their lives can be seen as not only arbitrary but also counter productive to the way they perceive they need to operate in order to successfully teach their students. Consequently, disagreements arise with faculty unions. Individual faculty members may not be open to accepting the practices of other campuses. This can result in serious difficulties for the implementation of any statewide learning network.

We also asked those who had gone through the planning process to create electronic consortia, what advice they wanted to share. Much of the advice listed below mirrors the barriers expressed by state and academic planners:

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- Agreement on vision and goals.
  All the parties involved in developing consortia must reach some consensus on that the goals for the project are. They need to agree on why they are working together and who they are planning to serve.

- Clearly define quality, outcomes and learning community.
  After the partners have agreement on their goals, they must reach agreement on how they will measure the quality of their efforts. To do so means setting definite outcomes.

- Standardize whenever possible among campuses.
  A couple of the barriers listed above, reflect the difficulty of trying to have students work through a single Website to gain access to the courses they need, but then find themselves faced with an complicated set of individual schedules, policies, prices, practices, and even equipment requirements. Developing as much similarity as possible among the campuses makes the non-academic aspects of studying online simpler for the student.

- Have funding models in place.
  Several of the projects surveyed obtained their initial funding from grants or one-time appropriations. When the initial funding ran out, they were faced with asking participating colleges, universities, corporations and/or students to help support the enterprise. The suggestion is to make the long term funding decisions early in the process.

- List coherent degrees & programs, not random courses.
  As several of these collaborative project were first getting started, the organizers were willing to accept whatever online or electronically delivered educational services the colleges or universities wanted to contribute. This resulted in a confusion of course offerings some of which were duplicative. Students seek more coherent choices that could actually be combined to form a certificate program or a degree.

- Get faculty reward & incentive structures in place early.
  This advice speaks for itself.

- Address complicated financial aid issues early.
  The U.S. Department of Education is currently exploring some new models for financial for students working electronically with more than one campus. However, it is still the case that if a student does need financial aid, there will have to be formal agreements among the participating colleges and universities to accommodate the federal and frequently the state regulations.

- Sort out student support systems early.

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There are a wide variety of non-academic support services that online students need to be successful, such as the ability to pay for their courses without coming to a campus, technical support that is available at convenient times, and the like. In a consortial arrangement, an agreement about which campus provides which services must be developed very early in the project to allow the providing group time to get its electronic systems in place.

- Develop revenue sharing among campuses early.
  - If different campuses are providing different aspects of the academic, administrative, and support services to the online students, it is critical that the costs and revenues be fairly distributed.

In general, we did not discover any surprises in our survey of the projects in effect or under construction in the WICHE states. However, we have found that this information crystallizes the considerations for groups planning to undertake the planning of a consortial virtual university/college.

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[i] The survey was developed and conducted by Sally Johnstone, Russ Poulin and Jennifer Carbajal on the staff of the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications and a visiting faculty member from the University of Alaska, Richard Hacker.

[ii] Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.

[iii] This taxonomy was developed by David Wolf (Western Association of Schools and Colleges) and Sally Johnstone. The full version of the taxonomy can be found in Getting the Language Right, Change, August, 1999.

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